

Memories of Antietam

I could talk all day about the battle of Antietam, but fortunately for you, I'm not going to do that. Last September 17 was the 150th anniversary of the battle of Antietam. As many of you know, Antietam was the bloodiest day in American military history, with approximately 23,000 casualties on both sides, including about 3,600 killed, and that's a conservative estimate. The 12th Massachusetts, for example, lost 64% of its men in the battle. The greatest percentage loss was the 1st Texas regiment, which lost 82% of its men, one of the very highest regimental casualty rates of the war. At least two soldiers from Concord were killed in the battle, John McDonough and Charles Wright, both of the 20th Massachusetts and both of whom are listed on the Honor Roll [what we read out on Memorial Day.]

The battle of Antietam was thus a giant tragedy, but not only because of the large-scale blood-letting. On the morning of the battle, the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia was outnumbered 2-1, with its back to the Potomac River, so a Union victory at Antietam could easily have ended the Civil War. Unfortunately, although the Army of the Potomac fought valiantly, the Union attacks were not coordinated, which allowed the Confederates to shift their forces on the field to newly threatened locations. As a result, the Confederates were able barely, just barely, to stop the Union assaults and subsequently escape across the Potomac to Virginia.

The Confederates always regarded Antietam as a victory, since they mostly held their ground against the Union attacks. But President Lincoln was waiting for a Union victory to issue his Emancipation Proclamation, so he claimed the Army of the Potomac won the battle of Antietam—which it did, in a strategic sense. Thus, even though the North missed a chance to end the war at Antietam, the battle assumes a political and moral importance well beyond the outcome of the campaign.

In 1907, the Town created a committee to establish the names of Concordians who fought in the Civil War. The Town published the Committee's report, called *The Soldiers and Sailors of Concord*, in 1908. When I first signed on to speak at this event, I obtained the list of names of the veterans and their regimental affiliations depicted in the painting as set forth on the plaque and looked up the men in the Report. But I found that only half of the men in the painting are listed in the report as serving in Union regiments. Though disappointing, this result was not entirely unexpected, as the first sentence of Preface of the report notes, "The task of making a complete and accurate list of the soldiers and sailors of Concord who served in the Civil War is an impossible one."

If there was doubt about the veterans in the painting, at least I should be able to identify which of their regiments served there by looking them up in the Union order of battle at Antietam. Here again, I was disappointed. The 2nd and 35th Massachusetts were both in the battle. The 2nd, a veteran regiment, suffered a total of 62 casualties in the Antietam campaign, and its 29-year old commanding officer, Wilder Dwight, was killed in the battle. The 35th (a brand new regiment mustered in a few weeks before) had about 800 men in line and lost 214 of them, according to the National Park Service (there's a regimental monument to the 35th near "Burnside" Bridge). No other regiment listed was at Antietam, just those two.

So I was forced to make a trip to Special Collections in the basement of the Library to consult the ultimate resource, the massive 8-volume *Massachusetts Soldiers, Sailors and Marines in the Civil*

War published in 1931. I started with the two men listed as serving in the regiments that I had verified were at the battle, John Tasker in company D of the 35th and Charles D. Littlefield in company D of the 2nd. Mr. Tasker enlisted on August 11, 1862, and was almost certainly at Antietam. Ruth Wheeler in 1963 said she had identified who was who in the painting, and if she's right, John Tasker is the gentleman all the way on the left. On the other hand, no "Charles D. Littlefield" from Massachusetts was listed in this massive resource, though a Charles D. Litchfield from Lunenburg served in company D of the 2nd and may also have been at Antietam. Mr. Litchfield, according to Ms. Wheeler, is the bearded gentleman standing next to the flag. Neither of these men is shown as a Concord resident in either the 1908 report or *Mass Soldiers, Sailors and Marines*.

What about the rest? Although I did confirm that everyone in the painting who is supposed to have served in Massachusetts regiments actually did so, I also confirmed that none were at Antietam, mostly because they mustered out too soon or mustered in too late. How many were Concordians? *Mass Soldiers and Sailors* lists 5 of the men as from Concord; the 1908 report lists 3 more. Thus, only half of the men in the painting are confirmed Concordians, though of course they may all have had a Concord connection.

To sum up, like many of you, I have been looking at this painting for years assuming that it showed an assembly of Concord veterans who were sharing their memories of the Battle of Antietam. This is not the case. At most of two of the men participated in the battle, neither of whom was from Concord, and although all of the men are veterans, only perhaps half are Concordians.

Reaching this conclusion reminds me of my second grade bird report. Everyone in my class was assigned a bird, and you had to draw a picture of the bird and write a few sentences about it. I was assigned the house wren. When I looked it up the house wren in a bird book, the description began by saying the house wren is not really a wren at all. I regarded this was a thrilling discovery, and I began my report by noting it. But after reviewing my report, my teacher called me up and said "when you do a bird report, I want you to tell me what the bird is, not what it isn't."

So I'll say a few words about what the painting is. Let me begin with a little story. Lili Ott, the Director of the Concord Art Association, was kind enough to share a monograph by Martha Nestor on Elizabeth Wentworth Roberts. Martha tells the following story. Just before *Memories of Antietam* was to be unveiled to the public, EWR learned that she had inadvertently omitted three Civil War veterans from a place called "Concord Junction." This was a serious embarrassment, and she didn't know how to cure the problem. So she sent a photo of the painting to her friend John Singer Sargent, who was staying at the Copley Plaza Hotel, and asked his advice. After viewing the photo, Sargent came out to Concord to see the painting at EWR's studio, which I think was on Estabrook Road. He suggested that she not change the existing groupings, but rather add an arch in the center background and put the 3 Concord Junction veterans below it. And that's what she did, though there seem to be four, not three of them.

Regardless of whether these veterans served at Antietam or all hailed from Concord, this painting, showing their somber gathering engulfed by an eerie blackness, the veterans proud, reflective, lost in thought, is a powerful work that has been admired for generations. Note that the only objects portrayed in the painting other than the veterans are a flag, a rifle, a sword, a map (of dubious authenticity as a map of the battle), none of which is clearly visible. Nothing detracts from the images of the veterans, who are the stars of the painting, almost like stars in a night sky. The

painting imbues our gatherings in this room with a seriousness of purpose and of public service and sacrifice.

On behalf of the Town, I thank Melissa Saalfeld and Rebecca Purcell for their leadership in making this project a reality and for organizing this event. Also, I would like to thank the Concord Art Association for donating the painting to the Town in 1929 and hosting today's reception, and the Community Preservation Committee for selecting the restoration of this painting as a worthy use of Community Preservation funds to put before the vote of Town Meeting. And it is a pleasure on behalf of the Board of Selectmen and the Town of Concord to welcome *Memories of Antietam* back among us today.

Jeff Wieand
Board of Selectmen